

## 38. ANGLO-SAXON MISSIONARIES II: BONIFACE

In the previous chapter, we told you about Willibrord. Remember, his task was often difficult and challenging, and he experienced much opposition during his long life. But he persevered. Then God sent more missionaries from England to The Netherlands.

### WINFRID

In the year 716, a relatively young man landed at Wijk-bij-Duurstede (south of The Netherlands) His name was Winfrid.

Like Willibrord, Winfrid had Anglo-Saxon parents. So he was related to the Saxons who lived in the eastern part of The Netherlands and Germany. He did not belong to the Franks. He studied in English monasteries for many years and was offered the most lucrative positions. But Winfrid was not after



**Winfrid** 675 – 754 AD Born in Crediton, United Kingdom; Assassinated June 754 AD in Friesland. Winfrid (Boniface) is buried in the Fulda Cathedral, Germany, Wikipedia.

money and property; he felt called to do mission work among the pagans. At that time, he was still a young man. Like Willibrord, he had a cheerful and childlike faith.

His heart's desire became reality when he landed on Dutch soil.

But he did not arrive at a favourable time. Radbod was busy destroying what Willibrord had painstakingly built up. Willibrord himself had to leave the land of the Frisians and flee.

What must Winfrid do?

He decides to go anyway. He travels to the city of Utrecht and manages to speak with king Radbod. Respectfully, but with passion, he asks the king of the Frisians if he is allowed to preach the gospel in his country. But Radbod refuses to listen to him. With rage burning in his eyes, he denies Winfrid entry into his country. Deeply disappointed, Winfrid returns to England. Radbod has made it impossible for him to do mission work in Frisia.

England is glad to see him back. Immediately they appoint him as abbot of a monastery. Winfrid can now live a calm and peaceful life. But this does not satisfy him. The desire remains in his heart to be a missionary for the pagans and show those poor blind people the way of salvation. He longs to revisit those countries. Two years later, he decides to try again. He boards a ship to cross the channel, yet this time he does not go directly to The Netherlands but decides to visit the pope first. The pope receives him kindly, and he commissions him to go and preach in Germany. The pope also gives him a collection of relics.

Then Winfrid quickly travels North and joins Willibrord in his work for three years. This zealous, tireless missionary is getting old and is delighted to get some help.

Willibrord would have loved to keep the young and energetic Winfrid with him so that he could become his successor. But Winfrid refuses. The pope had commissioned him to go to Germany, so to Germany he must go. So, he farewells his aged friend and travels on.

What awaits him there?  
He does not know.

Travelling through Germany, Winfrid encountered much opposition and many challenges, but he persevered. Multiple times he experienced close shaves with death. However, Winfrid was not afraid of death, and God richly blessed his preaching among those savage people, although it often seemed a hopeless task. He did not allow himself to be discouraged

Let's join Winfrid on one of his missionary journeys through Germany.

### THE BIG DONAR OAK TREE

A group of men struggle their way through the dark forest in the German province of Hesse. They are Winfrid and his helpers. Their luggage includes a tent to protect them against any rough weather. It is starting to get dark already, and progress becomes even more difficult, but Winfrid wants to keep going. His helpers are tired and are looking

forward to some rest. Suddenly they see a gleam of light between the trees in the distance.

What could that be?

Winfrid heads towards it, curious to find out what's there. His helpers follow him. When they get closer, they notice a large crowd in the dark forest. The missionary soon realises what is happening. A group of Saxons had come together to celebrate one of their pagan feasts.

In the middle of a clearing stands a giant oak tree dedicated to Donar, the god of thunder. The Saxons worship that 'sacred' oak tree. At the base of that enormous tree lies a large sacrificial stone. Over time, the Saxon's have brought many offerings on that stone. This evening, the offering will be for Wodan.

Unawares, Winfrid arrives just before the ceremony started.



*Winfrid chopping down the big Wodan tree. Gottesdiens.org*



(Historians disagree on exactly what happened next. What follows below is one of the more accepted stories.)

That evening, they plan to sacrifice a twelve-year-old boy. He was the son of the Saxon king. At the crucial moment, Winfrid manages to prevent that sacrifice from happening.

The Saxons are furious!  
They threaten to kill him!  
Suddenly a bright heavenly light shines through the trees.  
The Saxons are terrified.  
They are so frightened they do not dare to harm Winfrid or the poor boy.

Winfrid and his helpers chop down that sacred tree. It falls with a thundering crash<sup>1</sup>. The crowd of pagans stare, horrified at the destruction of their sacred tree, fully expecting Donar to kill the culprits with a bolt of lightning.

Surely Donar will avenge himself!  
Nothing happens.  
Donar does not harm Winfrid and his helpers at all!  
Now the Saxons lose their confidence in their gods and listen attentively to Winfrid's message.  
Many repent and are baptised.  
Winfrid uses the timber of the 'holy' tree to build a little church there.

Winfrid continued his travels through Germany, preaching the gospel wherever he went. In response, thousands turned away from paganism. He wrote that on that journey, more than one hundred thousand people were baptised! This miraculous result broke the power of paganism in those regions.

The pope, Gregory II, heard of this and was so excited that he calls Winfrid to Rome. As a reward, he appointed him as bishop and later even as archbishop. The pope changed his name as well; he no longer called him Winfrid but Boniface. That name means 'benefactor'. So as we continue our story, we'll also call him Boniface.

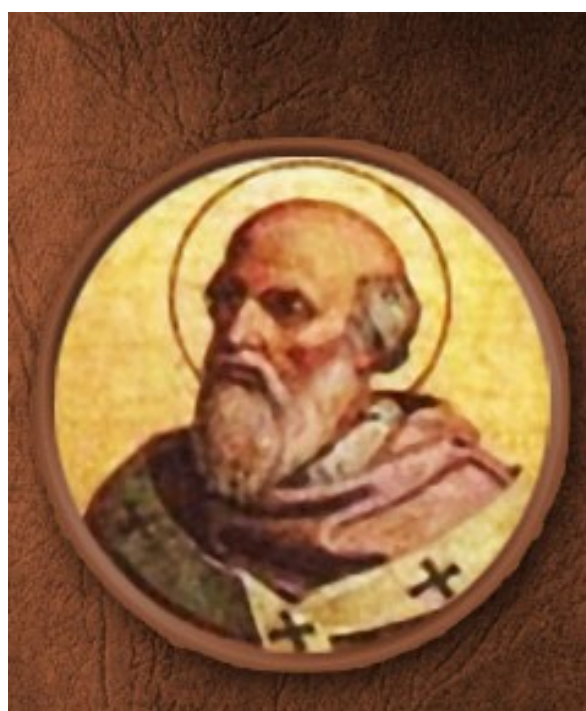
## BONIFACE

Boniface acknowledged the pope as head of Christ's Church on earth. He swore allegiance to the pope and became a missionary for Rome. That was sad; the brave, zealous missionary was wrong in this. We know that the pope is *not* the head of the Church. *Christ* is the Head of His Church.

The Lord Jesus does not need the pope to help Him! *He* reigns and governs His Church on earth.

Yet Boniface did a lot of good work. He founded monasteries and built churches. But, sadly, he left some relics in all those churches. He worshipped that worthless rubbish. He even believed that the relics possessed a preserving power.

Boniface worked in both Germany and The Netherlands. After the death of Willibrord, he took over the care of the Frisian churches. Naturally, he could not do it all by himself. That's



*Pope Gregory II 669-731 Wikipedia*

why he had lots of helpers. However, he demanded strict obedience to the pope from all of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Historians all agree that the tree was chopped down and that all follows is historically correct.

At the time, many priests and monks lived very sinful and wicked lives. As a result, they were a disgrace to the name of Christ and caused pagans to slander the church of the Lord.

Boniface acted quickly and firmly. Those who lived an offensive life and refused to repent, he deposed and drove away.

Although Boniface acknowledged the pope as head of the Church, he was not afraid to tell the pope the truth. On the contrary, he seriously reprimanded the pope because he continued to support those wicked priests and monks. But on the other hand, he went too far in acknowledging the pope.

If there were priests who did not recognise the pope, Boniface would persecute and imprison them! All his life Boniface did his best to unite all the Christians in those countries into one Catholic Christian Church, which, unfortunately, was the Roman Catholic Church.

To achieve that aim, he could be extremely strict. It was a good thing that he fought for unity because God's Church should not be divided. All that division is sinful. But his mistake was that he established the Roman Catholic Church.

Perhaps you may ask: "Was Boniface a Roman Catholic then?" Sadly, the answer must be: "Yes, in most things!"

Boniface had too many Roman Catholic ideas. But we should not forget that there was *only one* church at that time - the Roman Catholic Church! It did not yet have as many errors as in later years. It took many centuries before the Reformation happened. With the Reformation, God would deliver His people from the power of Rome. In the meantime, God still had His children in the Roman Catholic Church. There have always been people

of the Lord on earth; His Church will remain till the last day. That's why God maintained the Roman Catholic Church, despite the dreadful apostasy and the serious errors.

And Boniface?

In his preaching, he still presented Christ as the only Saviour, the only ground of salvation. But he also held to many serious errors: his acknowledgement of the pope and his adoration of relics.

*'Can there be a more fitting pursuit in youth or a more valuable possession in old age than a knowledge of Holy Writ? In the midst of storms, it will preserve you from the dangers of shipwreck and guide you to the shore of an enchanting paradise and the ever-lasting bliss of the angels.'*

*— St. Boniface*

What he believed about the Lord's Supper was also wrong. He taught that the bread and wine changed into Christ's flesh and blood, thereby accepting the popish mass.

What must we say about Boniface?

I do not know. I dare not judge whether he is saved or lost. But, thankfully, I do not have to judge Boniface. God has judged him, and that

was a *righteous* sentence. I am sure of one thing. God did *not* err.

Once again, I want to emphasise that the people of the Lord were still in the Roman Catholic Church in those days. Only later God would deliver His people *out* of the Roman Catholic Church. That would happen through the Reformation.

As mentioned, Boniface mainly preached in Germany and Willibrord among the wild Frisians in the Netherlands. Those two undaunted missionaries have done so very much for God's Church. Both were means in God's hand for the extension of His Kingdom. True, they had their errors. Boniface more so than Willibrord, yet God wanted to use their preaching as a blessing to many. Therefore, he sent those two *Anglo-Saxon* missionaries so that the double hatred of the

pagans for the *Frankish* missionaries would not bother them.

Willibrord died in the year 739. That was a heavy blow for both the Frisian church and Boniface. Now Boniface became much busier. Nevertheless, he did not forsake the young Frisian church. On the contrary, though he barely had time for it, he added the care of the Frisian church to his own work. That was a good thing because dark times were dawning for that church.

## RADBOD II

In 753, fourteen years after the death of Willibrord, Radbod II became king of the Frisian people. This new king was strictly pagan and did not tolerate Christianity in his country. He persecuted the Frisians who had become Christians. Radbod II travelled through the country, murdering and burning all things Christian. Churches and monasteries went up in flames. Only heaps of smoking rubble were left. He killed hundreds of priests and monks, and the ordinary church members had to return to paganism or else the savage pagan hordes of Radbod II would cruelly murder them. Radbod II would not rest until he had exterminated Christianity from his land. He would not rest until he had restored the ancient worship of the gods to its former glory. He was encouraged by the

pagan priests who had jealously watched the progress of Christianity. The Christians shed so much blood and tears!

No pen can describe what those new believers suffered under Radbod II. Only God knows that. Boniface, who was seventy-four years old already, hears what is happening to the Frisian church.

And ... that brave old man immediately travels North.

He will visit the severely persecuted Christians in Friesland. He wants to comfort them. He will preach the gospel there again to encourage those whose blood the pagans are shedding in streams.

Brave Boniface!

How does he dare to go? Oh, when it concerns the Church of the Lord, Boniface does not think of himself; does not consider his age; does not feel the fatigue of such a journey: he simply goes.

And ... God richly blesses that preaching!

In the face of vehement persecution, thousands of Frisians believed and were baptised, despite the threat to their lives. Here, too, we see that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church!

No matter how terribly Radbod II raged, he could not destroy God's Church! God Himself took care



*This painting was made in the year 975 and shows Boniface baptising one of his converts and also this martyr's death.*  
*Kerkgeschiedenis 1 pg 289*



that His Church remained. Here we again see something of that terrible warfare between Christ and Satan, warfare which shall continue to rage until Christ appears on the clouds of heaven. Only then, and not before, will that war end.

## DEATH OF BONIFACE

It is 5 June 754, the day of Pentecost!

Slowly the sun rises above the horizon. That night a heavy dew hung above the Frisian fields, but the warmth of the sun's rays soon dissipates the thick bank of fog. It looks to become a beautiful summer day, full of radiant sunshine. Boniface, the grey-haired missionary with fifty-three helpers, are camping near a small town called Murmerwoude, close to Dokkum, in the North of Friesland. Some writers tell us that they arrived there in boats and now slept on the shore in tents. It is quite possible. Boniface and his helpers are already awake. Although it is still early, everyone in the camp is busy. They expect visitors this morning.

Boniface has been preaching in the North of Friesland, and this has borne much fruit! Many Frisians turned their backs to paganism and have

become Christians. Today Boniface and his helpers hope to baptise them! What a solemn and beautiful moment that will be!

Boniface is delighted. Which farmer does not rejoice when he sees the harvest ripening in the fields? Boniface has also sown. He has scattered the seed of God's Word, and that seed has come up and borne fruit in the hearts of many pagan Frisians. Now they shall be baptised.

On this beautiful summer morning in June, it is still tranquil and peaceful. All of nature breathes peace and rest.

Listen!

Boniface hears a noise in the distance, very soft at first, but gradually it becomes louder and more evident. A happy smile appears on his wrinkled face. He thinks it is the converts coming early. The noise becomes louder and louder, swelling ominously. Suddenly wild screams are heard, mingled with cries for help. Boniface rushes outside because he cannot imagine what it could be! There he discovers to his horror that he is badly mistaken! Not the new Christians, but a raging, howling mob of pagan Frisians is approaching their camp! They are full of hatred



*'...with terrifying howls, those brutes come rushing in'* <https://slmedia.org/blog/stand-fast-in-what-is-right-st-boniface>

and rage toward the Christians. They want to kill those strange intruders! What are they doing here? They have no business here! Immediately Boniface realises that flight is impossible. The yelling mob is too close already. His helpers reach for their swords. Of course, they will defend themselves to the best of their ability! But Boniface forbids them to do that. He says: "Just get the relics."

He encourages his frightened and alarmed helpers. He says: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body." What happened then is too terrible to describe, but I may not conceal the truth.

Look, there stands the group of defenceless Christians with the grey-haired Boniface in their midst. Then, with terrifying howls, those brutes come rushing in, clenching the heavy clubs in their strong hands. The wild pagans smash their dangerous weapons down on the heads of the Christians who fall to the ground, dying. Bruised and bleeding, Boniface also falls to the ground. It is all over in a few moments.

There lie the mutilated bodies of fifty-four mission workers, including Boniface. They all died because of the cruel violence of the pagan Frisians. Cheering and jeering, the mob turns back. They have completed their dreadful work.

A deep silence descends on the camp of the missionaries; it is the silence of death. The rumour of this horrific massacre soon spreads.

The sad news also reaches the Frankish Empire. Fierce anger fills the heart of all who hear it. It is anger mixed with sorrow. When the Frankish king hears about it, he decides to take revenge. This atrocity may not remain unavenged. He must stop Radbod II's desire to kill!

He marches to the far North with a strong army. He wreaks bloody vengeance on the murderers, and their king, Radbod II, must flee.

All very well, but Boniface is dead! Frankish soldiers carry his body to Utrecht, and later, they bring it to the monastery at Fulda. The little city of Fulda is in Germany.

They bury him in the country where he worked for the greatest part of his life with so much blessing. There, his body lies till the last day. Then it shall arise.

Others continue his work. God preserves His Church, and other missionaries finish the work which Boniface had begun. I could tell you lots about those missionaries and their work. One of them, a certain Ludger, preached in Groningen. Despite much opposition, this missionary did not bring the Gospel there in vain.

Great stories, but I cannot mention everything, for then I would never get done. That's why we will stop here. We just want to show you the golden thread which runs through history, the thread of God's almighty rule, the thread of God's eternal faithfulness. We now understand something of how much strife and trouble it has cost to bring the gospel to the Netherlands. Those people have given their blood and life for that. The service of the Lord was worth everything to them.

No matter how much Satan exerted his power to prevent the spread of the gospel, he was not successful! King Jesus has conquered. Paganism *had* to yield. God's plan never fails.

What is the Lord's service worth to us? Let us all examine ourselves! Let each of us answer that.

## QUESTIONS

1. Identify Winfrid. How did his first missionary journey fare?
2. How and why did he receive a commission to go to Germany?
3. How did Winfrid end the worship of the sacred oak in Hesse? What results did it have?
4. How did he receive the name Boniface?
5. List the errors of Boniface.
6. List some of the beneficial actions which he performed.
7. What was the foundation of his preaching?

8. Why was the Frisian Church added to Boniface's responsibility?

9. What were the two goals of Radbod II?

10. How did Boniface react to the afflictions of the Frisian church?

11. How did Boniface die?

#### **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. Read the list of the errors of Boniface (Question #5). Which error do you feel was the most serious? Why?

2. Discuss Boniface's desire for unity. On what basis may we unite with another church? When must we remain separate?